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ABSTRACT

This final report describes a study which examined how new college students become aware of and involved in the academic and non-academic "learning communities" of the campus; specifically the report examined the social, academic and administrative mechanisms and processes through which students become involved in academic and social systems; important people who facilitate or impede the transition from high school or work to college; significant experiences affecting the outcome of this transition; and variations between individual students. The research used a cross-sectional, focus-group interview research design. Data were gathered in groups varying in size from one to eight students at four very different types of institution ranging from a relatively new community college to a large, predominantly white, residential, research university. A total of 36 group interviews were held with 132 students. Results suggested that the transition is complex and varies according to several factors: (1) college is an expected step in the life trajectory for many middle class students but not for many non-traditional students; (2) high school friends can be a bridge to full college adjustment or a complicating factor if they are not also attending college; (3) students' families can be a supportive asset or a source of stress as a student's relations with his/her family change; and (4) various types of "validation experiences" were key for all students to feeling deserving of a place in college. Appendixes contain correspondence to participating institutions, a consent form, and interview protocol. Includes 24 references. (JB)

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Out-of-Class Experiences Research Program

THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE PROJECT: FINAL REPORT

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THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE PROJECT: FINAL REPORT

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

According to Astin (1985), "Students learn by becoming involved" (p. 133). His notion of the basis of student learning has its roots in both the learning theory concept of time-on-task and the Freudian notion of cathexis -- the investment of psychological energy. Astin suggests five basic postulates of "involvement:" 1) involvement requires the investment of psychological and physical energy in "objects" (e.g., tasks, people, activities) of one sort or another, whether specific or highly general; 2) involvement is a continuous concept -- different students will invest varying amounts of energy in different objects; 3) involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features; 4) the amount of learning or development that occurs is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement, and 5) the educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to encourage student involvement (pp. 135-136).

This conception of how learning (however defined) occurs assigns central roles in student learning and development to both the institutional environment and the student who inhabits it. The institution plays a major role by affording students a variety of opportunities for encounters and engagement with other ideas and people who may challenge the individual's current knowledge structures, values, and attitudes. The student, however, plays an equally important role: Change is more likely when the student becomes involved in those encounters, when the student engages these new persons, knowledge, values, or attitudes both intellectually and emotionally. The student must actively exploit the opportunities presented by the environment.

Few people would argue with the proposition that a substantial portion of what students learn in college depends upon their involvement in the courses they take, the teaching they receive, and the faculty members who provide that teaching. Important as the curriculum, classroom, and faculty are in shaping student learning, however, ample evidence also indicates that the instructor and formal instructional experiences are not the only important sources of influence on students' content learning, higher-order cognitive skill development, learning-related attitudes and values, and persistence and degree completion. As much as 85 percent of a typical undergraduate's waking hours may be spent outside formal instructional settings, where students engage in a wide variety of activities, some academic and others not

(Kuh, et al., 1991). These out-of-class experiences may enhance and reinforce classroom learning, produce new learning, or even attenuate classroom learning by functioning in opposition to the objectives and activities of formal instruction and to the institution's overall educational mission.

Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of the last 20 years of research on the effects of college on students makes abundantly clear that these informal, out-of-class experiences (e.g., interactions with peers and faculty members, studying, non-required reading, extra-curricular activities) play an important role in shaping students' learning, as well as their attitudes, values and orientations to learning, in both specific and general ways. In particular, students' interpersonal interactions with faculty members and other students are especially influential in student development and change during the college years in both direct and indirect ways. The role of student-faculty interaction in the retention of traditional undergraduates has been firmly established (Pascarella, 1980), as has the importance of interactions with persons outside the institution for the retention of older, part-time, and commuter students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Faculty members and students are major agents of socialization (Chickering, 1969; Lacy, 1978; Vreeland, 1970) and largely define the character of the intellectual environment students inhabit, whether within specific campus sub-environments (e.g., the major department, residence hall, or student club), on a campus as a whole, or, for commuting and older students, in off-campus settings. Research efforts that focus solely on the classroom encounters of students and faculty members will seriously underestimate both the scope of the learning environment and the opportunities institutions have to shape and influence student learning.

Because of the apparent role in student learning played by student involvement in the academic and non-academic experiences of college, and because of the important influences students' out-of-class experiences have on learning and retention, the Out-of-Class Research Program of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment directed its energies toward finding answers to two general questions: 1) How do students become active and involved participants in an academic community?, and 2) How do students' out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions (whether on-campus or off) reinforce and augment -- or attenuate -- curricular and classroom learning and the achievement of broader general education goals?

This report describes "The Transition to College" project, which sought to illuminate issues raised by the first question above: How do students become aware of the academic and non-academic "learning communities" that make up a campus? How do they become members? What individuals, formal and informal activities, experiences, and conditions promote or impede students' "involvement" in these communities?

Research Questions

"Learning community" is understood to have two definitions. One is informal and includes casual, unstructured groups that form as a byproduct of normal socializing in academic and non-academic settings. The other is more formal and consists of groups that engage in formal academic activities in the classroom, or in formal academic and non-academic organizations, but which may produce friendship groups and interactions extending beyond the classroom or organization. This research project was concerned with the influences of both types of interactions on the transition from high school or work to college. The central research questions included the following:

- Through what social, academic, and administrative mechanisms do students new to a campus become involved in the academic and social systems of their institutions?
- What processes are involved in the transition from high school or work to college?
- Who are the important people who facilitate or impede that process?
- What experiences play a major positive or negative role in the success or failure of that transition?
- Is the nature of the transition process different for different kinds of students? For similar students entering different kinds of institutions?

Methodology

Study Design. While a good deal may be known about how students change during college and the role of student involvement in various dimensions of student change and development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), considerably less is known about how students become involved or about what institutional policies and programs effectively promote the transition from high school or work to college. Because of the lack of information about which variables may be involved, their relative importance, or the dynamics operating among them in the transition-to-college process, a cross-sectional, focus-group interview research design was adopted. Data (as explained in greater detail below) were to be gathered in groups varying in size from four to six students. (The actual number interviewed in any group ranged from one to eight).

Institutional Sample Selection. The National Center has selected for particular attention three policy issues relating to student learning: 1) variations in learning

outcomes that are related to individual student characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, and gender); 2) differences in outcomes that are a function of the kind of school a student attends (e.g., two- vs. four-year and commuter vs. residential institutions), and 3) the development of effective and generalizable assessment designs, instruments, and policies that will enhance learning and institutional effectiveness. In order to address directly the Center's first two policy foci (and, indirectly, the third), four institutions were selected that promised to afford considerable variation on these policy-relevant variables. Following is a brief description of the characteristics of the institutions selected for participation in this project. Fuller descriptions are given at the beginning of sections below summarizing and analyzing the interview findings for each institution. (All institutional names are fictitious.)

Southwest Community College (SCC): A relatively new, community college in a major southwestern metropolitan area. One third of the students are Hispanic. Over half of the students are members of racial/ethnic minority groups. Enrollment: 3,200.

Bayfield College (BC): A predominantly white, residential, liberal arts college in a middle Atlantic state. Enrollment: 4,300.

Urban State University (USU): A predominantly black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university in a major midwestern city. Enrollment: 7,100.

Reallybig University (RBU): A large, predominantly white, residential, research university in a middle Atlantic state. Enrollment: 36,000.

Letters (see Appendix A) were sent to the Presidents inviting their institution to participate. The letter explained the National Center's overall research and dissemination agenda and outlined the Transition Project's purposes and research questions. The letter also stressed the importance of voluntary student participation and that both individual students' and institutional identities would be maintained in all reports of the study's findings. Presidents were asked to identify a contact person with whom we could work closely in the selection of students and who would make the necessary campus arrangements for the interviews.

Student Sample Selection. Institutional contact persons were sent information on the characteristics of students sought for participation (see Appendix B). Contacts were also sent a sample letter of invitation to be sent to potential student participants and an "informed consent" sheet outlining for students the nature of the research and stressing that their participation was voluntary (see Appendices C and D). Potential participants were advised that the interview would be a group session, that it would

last about an hour, and (on three of the four campuses) that they would be compensated for their participation. No compensation was offered at the fourth site because none was requested by the institution. Contact persons on two campuses advised us of institutional policies of compensating student participants in such studies, and the contact person on the third campus indicated student participation was unlikely unless compensation were offered. Students on the campuses with compensation policies were each given $10 in cash for their participation, while students on the third campus were offered a $10 gift certificate good at the institution's bookstore.

Since the primary purpose of this research was to learn about the nature of the transition students make from work or high school to college, and because little is known about the nature of that process or about the people and experiences that play important roles in it, the guiding concern in student selection was to ensure that students from diverse personal and academic backgrounds were invited. No effort was made to select participants who would be proportionally representative of the new student population on a given campus or of the national population of students entering higher education in the Fall of 1991. Thus, no attempt was made to select random samples of new students at each participating institution. Rather, contact persons were asked to form a specified number of groups consisting of students with specified characteristics appropriate to the overall entering student population on each campus (e.g., a group of females; a group of commuting students, mixed by gender; a group of black students).

PROFILE OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED

Site	Groups	Men	Women	Minority	Total
Southwest Community College	5	8	14	15	22
Bayfield College	6	8	10	2	18
Urban State University	12	20	11	30	31
Reallybig University	13	21	40	9	61
Totals	36	57	75	56	132

Interview Protocol and Data Collection Procedures. The interview protocol developed for this study was purposefully open-ended. The protocol (see appendix) was broadly structured to contain prompts for pre-college information about students and their decisions to go to college; their expectations for, and the reality of, college; the significant people and events in their transition; selected characteristics of the

transition itself, and the general effects students felt college was having on them. Questions were constructed so as to minimize insofar as possible leading students to any particular response. For example, rather than ask if faculty played an important role in their transition, students were asked "Who are the most important people in your life right now?" Whether students' mentioned institutional faculty and staff members or not, their responses would be equally revealing.

Data Analysis. All interview sessions were tape-recorded, and members of the seven-person research team who conducted the interviews transcribed and/or summarized the tapes. Both individual and group analyses of the interview transcripts (over 200 pages) were conducted, identifying themes that ran through each interview session and through the set of interviews for each campus. Research group discussions of these interviews focused on each campus, seriatim. When the transcripts for each institution had been reviewed and discussed by the entire research group, group analysis focused on the identification of themes that were common across campuses and sub-groups of students, as well as on thematic differences that were distinctive to a campus setting or student subgroup.

The following sections of this report describe each case site and summarize the interviews conducted at that institution. Themes common to each site, or to a specific subgroup of students at that site, are described. The final section of the report examines themes that are common across institutions (or for subgroups of students across institutions), or which appear to be salient for particular institutions. The case studies are presented in the order in which they were conducted.

SECTION 2: BAYFIELD COLLEGE

Setting

Bayfield College is a private, Comprehensive I institution, located in an east-coast state. Its curriculum includes both traditional liberal arts majors and some professional programs, such as business, education, and nursing. The number and size of its graduate programs recently have increased, and college administrators intend to seek university classification within the next few years. Students seem to be aware of the intention and perceive it as an indication of increased status for the institution and, concomitantly, for themselves. About 4,000 students attend Bayfield. Most are white, from middle class backgrounds, and reside in the state in which Bayfield is located. In 1991-92, annual tuition and fees for a residential student amounted to approximately $14,000. Although Bayfield is a private institution, some in-state students receive state assistance to attend.

Respondents

A total of 18 students were interviewed: 10 women, 8 men. All but one were of traditional age (18-22). One male and one female were ethnic minority students. Two of the interviewees were transfers, one was a second semester college student, and one was a sophomore. These latter four students were asked to respond to the interview questions based on their recollections of their first term at Bayfield College. Students were interviewed in the following groups:

3 individual interviews (1 traditional-aged residential male, 1 traditional-aged commuter male, 1 non-traditional residential female)

1 group of traditional-aged residential students (3 males, 3 females)

1 group of traditional-aged residential students (5 females)

1 group of traditional-aged commuter students (3 males, 1 females)

It is important to note that the interviews were arranged by a faculty member with administrative responsibility for a student leadership program. Many, if not all, of the interviewees were personally invited by this individual to participate in the research program. As a whole, the respondents were above-average students, concerned about society and politics. Several were intending to major in political science, education, and business administration, with the remainder planning majors in communications or other social science fields. None had declared a science or mathematics major. While several of the students interviewed had part-time jobs

either on- or off-campus, none mentioned them as a factor affecting their experience at college.

Many of the students interviewed expressed disdain for the drinking, drug use and general "partying" they perceived as prevalent among their campus peers, particularly those who participate in Greek life. Time did not permit the arrangement of interviews with groups of fraternity and sorority members, or a group of students with no apparent connection to the student leadership program. Such students might have described a different transition into life at Bayfield College.

Expectations and Actual Experiences

Social Life. These students were generally very disappointed with the social life they found at Bayfield. Many complained that "nothing is happening." While, this was especially the case for the commuters, even the residential students complained that it's a "suitcase school"; many residents go home on the weekends and those who do acknowledge that they are part of the problem. Others complained that it was cliquish, that there were some rich "snots," "a lot of snobbery." Although some mention was made of Greek organizations--that they are stand-offish, these respondents generally appeared to know little about them. Others stated that BC was not that different from high school, as far as cliques go. All the commuters and some of the residential students spoke of maintaining strong ties with friends they had before college.

Academic Life. Expecting their classes to be much harder than they were, and the faculty to be inaccessible, almost all were surprised to find that the faculty are friendly, helpful, accessible, even "cool." They like their classes. There were no strongly positive reviews about their academic advisors (one mentioned that it took a long time to get an appointment with his advisor), but no serious complaints either. One student noted it was hard to get close to a faculty person assigned to you for just one year.

Important People and Support for the Transition

Student Support People. In response to interview questions about the most important people during this period of their lives, the residential students responded with remarkably glowing remarks about the student support people. They especially liked the POSSEs (Peers Offering Support Services for Education) assigned to their dorms, or their dorm Resident Assistants. They explained that these older students were non-parent-figure resources with whom they could discuss their problems without "getting in trouble." These older and wiser individuals gave the students an opportunity to discuss the mistakes and difficulties they experienced while trying to

become more independent without jeopardizing those same efforts to become more autonomous. (Bayfield also has MARSHALLS (Mentors Active in the Resident Students Halls) who are faculty and administrators who adopt a residence hall floor, but only one student mentioned a MARSHALL during our interviews. All students interviewed had very positive things to say about the services offered at the Life and Career Advising Center (LCAC) which provides (as the catalog states) "comprehensive counseling in academic, career and personal matters" and is "strategically located on the first floor wing of the College Center and open 50 hours each week."

Interestingly, the commuter students had relatively little to say about student support people. They mentioned that one dean at the LCAC was helpful, and they spoke unenthusiastically about the freshman orientation activity.

Friends. All but a couple of the residential students spoke of the importance of the friends they had met since arriving at college. Some also spoke of the continuing importance of their friends from high school. The question about whether and how one's network of friends had changed since first arriving at college resulted in responses like, "Well, sort of." They became friends with some of the people they happened to meet first, and drifted away from others. The commuter students had almost nothing positive to say about the importance of new friends made at college. At best, one commuter made positive remarks about getting to know a few older adult students in his classes.

Family. The commuters generally had positive things to say about their families, two indicating that their relations with parents had gotten stronger. The residential students varied on this matter, some indicating that they were rather glad to be out of the house, and others saying that their families were still important--although apparently not a major sources of support.

Faculty. While faculty members were not often named in direct response to the question "Who are the most important people in your life?", the significance of faculty contact pervaded the interviews. Two students referred to their relationships with professors and to the small class sizes in response to the question "What's special about this place?" Comments in several individual and group interviews also identified faculty members as willing to "spend time" with and "really caring" about students. Professors who knew their students' names were appreciated. The comments of a male commuter summarize the importance of faculty as a source of support: "I feel that the close professor-student relationships have a lot to do with how I'm performing in classes. It's really helping me out, because I feel more comfortable with them, and I can listen to them more."

Important Events and Activities

Getting Involved. Residential students (mixed by gender) talked very directly about the importance of being involved in activities on campus and appreciated the efforts made by college personnel to support student organizations (like Students Offering Support). The young women in the all-female group of residential students placed less importance on being involved. These students were among those who appear to help make Bayfield a "suitcase school," revealing little commitment to the school, as such. By contrast, students in the mixed-sex residential group expressed irritation with the less-involved, home-for-the-weekend students for failing to help build a more enjoyable social life at the college. The former group, while vaguely understanding the problem, expressed a kind of indifference to it. One interpretation is that their indifference expresses a certain defensiveness--it's easier and safer to dismiss other students as being "snobs," "cliquish," and "jerks" than to make the effort to get involved.

Commuter students indicated they knew being involved would probably make their college time more enjoyable, but, with the exception of two unusually motivated and aggressive young men, they were not involved. By contrast, the two exceptional students were active in several campus activities. Our impression is that, finding few existing attractive avenues for social interaction at the college and not knowing how to initiate such interactions, these students had not yet developed any commitment to the social life of the college. For the time being, their commitment to "college" consisted of their dedication to their formal studies, and their social life continued to consist of hanging out with pre-college friends.

The experience of one nontraditional Black female was a notable exception. A commuter during her first semester at Bayfield, she participated one weekend in a "multicultural retreat" where "all the girls lived in this big cabin." The retreat marked a turning point in her transition to college: Discovering that she had more in common with the college "kids" than she had previously recognized, she decided to move into campus housing beginning with the term in which she was interviewed. She has also become active in a club, Women of Essence.

Institutional Climate

What makes Bayfield special? Bayfield's small size clearly made it special to its students. This characteristic was strongly associated with the ample attention students got from faculty and student support people. The remote setting and physical beauty of the campus contributed to a sense of security and, in some cases, serenity. The size and campus architecture also seemed to contribute to a familiar, if not familial, atmosphere at the college. Students, faculty, and staff greeted one

another by name and walked together across the campus. Faculty and support people took responsibility for initiating and maintaining contact with students and as students put it, faculty and support staff "go the extra mile" and "say 'hi' [to students] after class."

Other points. Almost all interviewees mentioned the high cost of the college. The commuters were most sensitive to it and were inclined to attribute their less satisfactory social life at college to the fact that they didn't have the money to live in the dorms. Students in both of the residential groups also spoke about "snobs," and cliques, and indicated that there was a clear sense of who has lots of money and is accustomed to getting the possessions and services they want. All the students agreed that the tuition was too high, especially given the restricted library and gym hours.

Given the generally positive attitude toward faculty and support people, we were surprised to find consistent student criticism of the administration. Students in two of the group interviews and one of the individual interviews revealed that students believed the administration tended to cover up problems that occurred on the campus.

Experiences as a Member of an Ascribed Group

The one Black-Hispanic male interviewed liked being on a dorm floor with other minority students and had a strong positive reaction to being in a much more secure environment than his home area. The 26-year old Black female was pleasantly surprised at her emerging role as confidante and mentor to younger women of color. The traditional-aged majority women had relatively little to say in response to the question about "being women"; they spoke about security on campus. Perhaps the comments made in one interview to the effect that the men at Bayfield were "jerks who want just one thing" most meaningfully conveyed both their interpretation of their experiences qua women and their overall social experience.

"Real Learning" and the Transition to College

The interviews helped us to understand that these students view "real learning" and "transition" both as being about becoming independent, and about developing interpersonal relationship skills.

Independence. The development of specific skills such as "money management" or "time management" emerged as important in both the individual and group interviews. Common themes included taking responsibility setting goals, meeting deadlines, and for one's physical, financial, and academic well-being. The mixed-

gender group of residential students compared notes about the degree to which each of them was already independent before coming to college, implying that for them "becoming independent" [from parents] was what "real learning" was all about.

Trust and Interpersonal Relationships. Several of the residential women students, in both the all-female and mixed groups, responded to the question about "transition" in terms of the importance of friends and learning whom one can trust. The returning woman student spoke of her need to learn to "chit-chat," to engage comfortably in casual conversation. Two male residential students observed how they had become more self-conscious about how to participate in friendships. One talked about learning how to consider other people's perspectives, while another spoke of the importance of being more discriminating about whom he trusts. One male commuter remarked on the diversity of people with whom he has learned to "interrelate": "In high school, I may have shunned actually associating with the types of people that I associate with now."

In addition (or perhaps as a prerequisite) to learning to get along with others, a number of students, particularly women, identified learning more about themselves. One residential female student noted that she was learning that she has the ability to do well. A residential male student spoke of learning that he has to depend on himself and take responsibility for his own happiness. For the returning adult student, the transition from full-time employment to being a student included revising her self-image to reflect new-found competence and taking a more critical stand toward authority.

The Academic Transition. Not all students perceived "real learning" as different from classroom or academic learning. Immediate responses to the questions about transition and real learning frequently referred to classroom experiences. Many of the traditional aged students equated their transition to college with their ability to master academic content, some experiencing difficulty in comparison to their high school achievements, but most pleasantly surprised at their ability to handle college-level study. When asked, "Where does the real learning occur here?" or "Where have you learned the most since you came here?" some students offered specific classes or study techniques as illustrations. One student caught her interviewer by surprise when she responded, "'The real learning?' You say that like it's not in the classroom."

SECTION 3: URBAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Setting

Urban State University (USU) is a commuter institution with an enrollment of some 4,600 undergraduates, of whom nearly 90 percent are African Americans. The campus, located in a major midwestern city, is attractive and spacious, with new buildings and nicely kept grounds. At the same time, USU is also strikingly close to urban areas that made women students who use public transportation feel insecure.

Interviews were held in the student union, where there was an obvious sense of community. Numerous groups of students were interacting in the game room, cafeteria, and seating areas. However, the cafeteria was closed and few students were visible toward the end of the afternoon.

Respondents

Thirty-one respondents participated in dozen interview sessions. In addition, three individual interviews were held with students, two with scheduled participants, and one with an upperclassman during a lunch break. While focus groups had originally been scheduled to be composed of six respondents per session, due to a low response rate, the focus groups ranged in size from two to four participants each. Because of the high number of scheduled participants who did not attend group sessions, additional respondents were solicited on-site at the campus student center where the interview groups were being held. These impromptu sessions accounted for four of the ten group sessions. In total there were 11 female and 20 male participants. The majority of respondents were first semester first-year students. One group included three junior males (two of whom had transferred from other colleges), another had a junior female, and one of the individual interviews was with a senior. Excepting one white male and one Black male from Central America, all respondents were African American. Two respondents (both female) were returning adult students, while the remainder were traditional aged.

Many of the students were employed and noted this as a reason for having limited time for campus involvement. These students indicated that they came to USU for classes and left after the classes were over. However, a number of students who described themselves as connected to the University were also working and demonstrated considerable involvement in campus clubs and organizations. Many of the students who were not yet involved or connected hoped to be and predicted that they would be in the future.

Both traditional-aged and adult students commented on age as an issue significant in their transition to college. The adult students provided an important

perspective on the college experience. These interviewees reported relief as they found more adult students than they had expected. In addition, they reported gains in self-esteem by performing as well (or better) than younger students, and one respondent indicated that she sees school as an "escape" from her life. Traditional-aged students, in turn, reported that they had not expected to find so many adult students. One reported feeling good that an adult student treated her ideas and opinions with respect, while another intimated that joining extracurricular activities was a bit more difficult because many of the members were older.

The Decision to Go to College

A number of students noted that they had no doubts about going to college. However, many of these students stated their intention to be the first in their family to complete college. These students' drive toward college completion seemed to come from their personal history of academic performance and from family expectations which developed from that performance, not from any tradition of college completion within the family. While many students would be classified as first generation college students, many had extended family members who were college graduates, had siblings who were attending or had attended college, or had parents who had one or more years of college course work.

Several indicated that pre-college experiences like Upward Bound and certain grammar school teachers were important in orienting and motivating them to attend college. Also important, in some cases, were personally traumatic experiences. (Being jailed unfairly, for example, was given by one young man as the reason for his choice of a criminal justice major.)

The majority of respondents -- both adult and traditional-aged students -- indicated they were attending college to increase their economic opportunities.. This motivation often sprang from prior or current real-life experiences, where students contrasted their past or current work with what they hoped to do once they received their degrees. For many, college represented an escape from a potential live of menial work and minimum-wage jobs. Furthermore, many noted that they planned to continue on to graduate school to get a "good job," as opposed to only a "decent" job, which is obtainable with an undergraduate degree. It is noteworthy that the "good jobs" these students were seeking to obtain with their college degrees often were in fields that would enable them to help the economically depressed and politically disenfranchised neighborhoods of this city. For example, several were planning to major in fields like pre-med, criminal justice, and nursing. Those planning less overtly socially relevant careers (e.g., in engineering, accounting, fashion design) experienced an awareness that they would be among the relatively few ethnic minorities in these professions. They experienced a strong sense of pride and identity in this.

Last, several students articulated a "liberal arts" sensibility. For example, after explaining that job certification had been her initial motivation, one student went on to say that she now had an additional reason for attending college. "It's more than going through all of it to make money. . . . It's to better myself - to become the person that I want to become, a higher intellectual being."

Reasons for Attending Urban State

Frequently, these students noted financial issues as a reason for attending USU rather than another college or university. Several students reported that they had intended to enroll elsewhere, usually further away from home, but did not because they were unable to get financial support (e.g., parents made too much for students to qualify for aid); others reported their parents wanted them to prove they could handle college-level work before moving away from home. In addition to finances, several students indicated that they had come to USU because they did not have the grades to get into other colleges or universities. Yet others indicated that they had come to Urban State because of the smaller class sizes.

Many students noted they attended Urban State because of its proximity to their homes. While most saw this as an advantage, one student felt that he would be more effective in pursuing his academic career if he were away from home and able to avoid the social demands of friends and family. (This student, however, also reported that he had left another institution which was in a different region of the country because of the emphasis on partying.) Another student who had planned to go away to school suggested that there were benefits to remaining in this city and further developing her relationship with her family, and that going away to school did not afford her this opportunity. A few students suggested that the university should begin to provide on-campus housing, as if to provide an intermediate step in the transition to a more "independent" college experience.

The reputation of the school was discussed in several groups. While some students felt that the school had a good reputation, others noted that the reputation was not what it should be, and that in reality, the school, "is one of the best kept secrets (in this city)." Students indicated that they had thought the school was for "those who'd settle for less, but found that it was not like that at all." Similarly, one student stated a concern about USU's image as a glorified high school, but added that this was a "misconception and image. When you bring up the name of the school, its like, 'Oh, are you in a secondary high school?' . . . It's a lot more difficult than most people think." One student, however, voiced a concern that USU's reputation might prove to be an obstacle upon entering the job market. Because of this concern, she planned to transfer to another school after her sophomore year.

A number of other students also indicated that they planned to transfer from Urban State. Reasons varied, but the majority indicated that it was because USU did not offer a desired degree program, not because they did not like the school.

Important Relationships and Support for the Transition

In response to interview questions about who were the most important people during this period of their lives, the vast majority of respondents indicated family members. Many noted that their families and extended families supported their efforts to succeed in college and that their families were often proud of them for being the first generation in the family to attend college. Some students noted that extended family members or high school friends motivated them to attend because their own lives served as "negative examples" of life-course decisions to avoid. The role of family did not always support the decisions to attend college, however. For example, one returning adult student indicated that the decision to go to school and not to work was difficult due to the needs of her family. Her decision to attend college conflicted with her feelings of immediate economic responsibility for her family.

The choice to attend college also appeared to be connected to other family issues. Respondents indicated that they hoped to be role models for their siblings, or in the case of one adult student, for her children.

Several interviewees stressed the important role fellow students played in supporting the transition to college. Many students indicated that they considered themselves at risk, and in need of each other's support to get through courses successfully. They impressed the research team as "survivors" from a high school environment that did not encourage college attendance. In this regard, several interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be at USU and were quick to acknowledge that they depended on the support they received from their families, college peers, and from USU faculty and staff. While most respondents focused on support from peers on campus, a few indicated that they received significant support from their counselor. Student responses relative to faculty were varied, but generally tended to be positive. Students often noted that faculty were concerned about them, and that they had not expected the degree of support from faculty. Some noted that teachers in high school had told them not to expect individual attention or support. Yet the students found that faculty were available during office hours, provided their phone numbers, monitored students' performance in class, and provided feedback about this performance. However, some respondents felt that the faculty were not particularly caring or that specific faculty did not support their learning. This was sometimes attributed to instructional style, language difficulties (i.e., instructors who spoke English as a second language) or problems with the administration.

Important Events and Activities

That students did not convey a sense of important activities which were characteristic of the transition experience at Urban State may be related to the schools' being a commuter institution. In the student union setting, however, socializing, especially among young men, was readily apparent, and students noted that there were a number of academic and interest clubs which afforded opportunities to meet other students and become involved in campus life. While the administration has organized workshops for in-coming students, very few noted these activities as important or salient.

Institutional Climate

In general, respondents indicated that they liked the school's atmosphere, describing it as a supportive environment where it was easy to meet people and make friends, and emphasizing that peers were supportive. One student indicated that at USU, it was easy to "feel at home." Some of the respondents had friends at USU who formed a ready-made network; others indicated that they were able to get assistance from peers in their classes, sometimes forming study groups. In discussing the positive environment, students indicated that peers seemed to understand the importance of not discouraging each other regarding their school work, and that the transition was a "fragile" time. Not all students, however, were a part of this warm, supportive environment. Some students, often those who worked and left campus after classes, reported that they did not feel connected to USU. A minority of students viewed the campus environment negatively. These students saw the social life on campus as a distraction from learning and disapproved of a focus on "popularity." Those with negative views of the campus climate were also critical of the faculty and administration. These students voiced a distrust of the system and felt cheated by having to take certain courses (apparently remedial) which did not count for credit.

Experiences as a Member of an Ascribed Group

The campus is located in an economically depressed section of the city, and some students, particularly female students, reported concerns regarding safety on campus. In particular, students report that at night wooded areas of campus on the way to public transportation are not adequately patrolled and are dangerous.

While few students made overt comments related to attending a predominantly Black institution, it seemed clear that students were enjoying and perceived themselves as benefitting from this scholastic environment.

"Real Learning" and the Transition to College

In discussing USU, the respondents made it clear that learning was a priority. Interviews often described learning as taking place at home while studying alone or in small study groups. Respondents also indicated that they learned in class, and in all the experiences around them. Their focus on learning was exemplified by one student who stated, "I'm here to learn; everything else is secondary." Another student, who had been assaulted in high school because of his academic interests and motivation, noted that "Here, I can read a book on a bench and nobody will throw a brick at me."

Students reported that the transition from high school was notable because college was less structured and required more self-discipline and self-reliance. These students, who generally described their high school experiences as requiring little effort, explained that they now had to develop study skills and strategies to keep up with the academic demands. Many indicated that developing these new abilities was part of the "real learning" for them, and was important in the development of self-esteem.

SECTION 4: REALLYBIG UNIVERSITY

Setting

Reallybig University (RBU) is a large, residential, research University with an undergraduate population of approximately 32,000, and whose primary purposes include teaching, research, and service. The campus is located in a rural area of a middle Atlantic state, and almost all freshmen students live on campus. The average SAT score for entering students is approximately 1100. Approximately 8% of the undergraduate student population is twenty-four years of age or older, 4% are racial/ethnic minorities, and 46% are women. Most undergraduates study full time, and matriculate immediately after graduation from high school. While most students come from families who could be described as "middle class," approximately one third of the entering freshmen are the first from their families to enter college.

RBU has a strong academic reputation, especially in the science and engineering fields, and offers over 300 academic majors. Freshmen attend mostly large classes (from 50 to 1200 students) taught by instructors and assistant professors, very generously assisted by graduate teaching assistants. RBU has an even stronger reputation as a highly social, "party school," and has more fraternities and sororities (approximately 90) than any other institution in the country. The out-of-class environment is characterized by an abundance of social, recreational, cultural, and developmental programs.

Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 61 undergraduate students interviewed, all lived in on-campus residence halls, were eighteen or nineteen years old, and were studying full time. Two thirds were women, and participants included three African Americans and three Asian Americans. (More students of color were invited to participate but for unexplained reasons subsequently did not take part.) Students' academic fields included business (20%), sciences (5%), communications (5%), and other (8%). In addition, approximately 15% were undecided about their academic field. Given the academic programs at RBU, it is not surprising that over one half were in business, science, or engineering.

College and Institutional Choice

For almost all of the students interviewed, going to college was never a conscious choice. It was always assumed by both themselves and their parents. For these students, college represented just another self-evident rung on the ladder to good old American middle class success. It was expected, something that was wanted

and needed (if you wanted to have a good job and a decent income) and was no more a "big deal" than previous educational experiences.

In some instances, even the decision to attend Reallybig was never a conscious choice. Many said that they and their parents considered RBU "the best academic bargain for the money," and if they could get in, they would attend RBU. They applied to other schools, but only as a back-up. In other instances, RBU was a second or third choice, after being turned down by, or being unable to afford, more academically prestigious institutions.

Expectations vs. Reality

It was clear that most of those interviewed expected RBU to be a big place that would be impersonal and potentially overwhelming. They anticipated large classes, little faculty contact, and for the most part, being "treated as a number." Most expected that the academic demands on them would be much harder than in high school. A significant number said they really didn't have any expectations. They also expected to spend time with other friends from high school, particularly those that were already here.

Many said they expected a somewhat tense, high-strung, fast-moving environment, one that was very socially oriented and offered a wide variety of activities in which to get involved. Many of their expectations were framed by what they had been told by family members and friends who had attended or were currently attending RBU.

As one might anticipate, in some instances expectations were confirmed, an in other instances they were not. All expected the large size of the institution to be influential, but the reality of size was different for different people. Some expected RBU to be large and impersonal, and found it that way. For others, bigness was quickly downsized through friends, floormates, resident assistants and other students from their high schools. These students also had some beneficial contact with faculty and residence hall staff. Then there were those who expected a large and impersonal environment and were even more overwhelmed by size than they anticipated. For these students, large classes proved to be more of a problem than they anticipated. While they expected little instructor contact, some underestimated how important faculty contact was to their previous academic success.

These individuals differed on RBU's academic demands. For some, the demands were about what they expected. For others, they were much harder than expected, and for still others, the demands were easier than expected. To a large degree, students' social expectations were met or exceeded. Finding friends turned out to be less anxiety-producing than anticipated, and friends were very important to

their successful transition to RBU. One minority student said he was surprised at the extent of separation of majority students from minority students, since this was not the case in his high school.

Important Relationships in the Transition to College

Friends topped the list of important relationships for these students: friends from high school, new friends formed in college, boyfriends, girlfriends, and roommates. New students tended to hang out in clusters of other new students, usually defined by their living unit or friends from high school. Many mentioned the importance and influence of their resident assistant. The process of finding friends seems to start with hanging-out with friends from high school, or other students on the residence hall floor, and then expanding that circle of friends to other students.

A close second on the list of important relationships for these students was family: mothers, fathers, siblings, and extended family members. For many students, family support was and is critical to their transition to RBU. Many students expressed satisfaction at being on their own, but many also commented that they knew their parents were there if they needed them.

Virtually no one mentioned faculty, staff, or other adults in the campus environment as important people in the transition to college. Occasionally a student would mention a teaching assistant, but by and large the transition appears to have taken place with little or no adult influence outside of family members. While some students spoke with faculty in the classroom, virtually none had any contact with faculty or staff outside the classroom, for either academic or personal reasons. A few students admitted that they could not remember the names of any of the faculty who taught their courses.

Important Events/Activities

Students chose to answer these questions in basically four different ways. There Some could not think of any activities or events in which they participated. Most of these students said they were so busy studying and trying to survive academically that they did not have time to get involved in other things. Many said that after they established themselves academically, they could "afford" to get involved in the life of the campus.

A second group chose to answer by listing activities, clubs, and organizations in which they participate. Residence hall government/activities were the most frequent activities mentioned, followed by academically-related clubs, avocational clubs, fraternities, and sororities. While participation in intramural sports was a frequently mentioned activity for men, it was not mentioned at all by women. Going to football

games and "partying" were mentioned by both men and women as major social activities.

A third group chose to answer in a more process-oriented way. Some said that "simply surviving" was their major activity, while others said overcoming the size of RBU was all-consuming. In both instances it seemed that students found some satisfaction in surviving against the odds, and as they experienced success, they also felt an increase in self confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy. Still others said making new friends, and participating in social events and activities were major activities for them.

And finally, there were those who could not identify specific events or processes, but simply found "being here" and being a part of the larger RBU campus environment something to feel good about. Some achieved this sense of identification by being a part the huge crowds of people at football games, while others seemed to identify with the somewhat fuzzy, elusive, and undefined concept of "RBU." But in all cases, it seems that involvement in the social environment clearly takes precedence over the academic environment. No student mentioned classroom experiences or classroom-related events or activities, except for some minimal involvement in academically related organizations, as salient experiences in their transition to college.

Gender Identification

When asked what it meant being a man or a woman on this campus, the responses were more blank looks than anything else, especially for the men. It was clear that first semester men thought very little about gender identity. Perhaps the social and academic life is so male-dominated that it never becomes an issue. In any event, it was a surprising question to the men, who had virtually nothing to say in response.

For the most part, the same was true for the women, most of whom believed that what they were experiencing, both inside and outside the classroom, was happening to men as well. While relationships were important for women, so was "making it on my own," which is a more traditionally-defined masculine goal. On the whole, the women interviewed did not yet have any awareness of, for example, the "chilly" classroom or out-of-classroom climates described in feminist literature. One woman did say she was having difficulty with a teaching assistant who seemed to call on men more than women, provided more positive reinforcement for comments by men, and seemed to grade men higher than women. But she was clearly an exception.

A number of women raised the issue of their physical safety. Women knew that walking alone on campus at night was a high-risk activity. They also knew that going alone to a fraternity or off-campus apartment party was a high risk. As a consequence, women looked out for one another. Roommates insisted on knowing where each other were, and when they would be back, especially at night. Groups of women attending parties off-campus would look out for one another, monitoring where each of them was at the party, who they might be leaving with and where they were going, and even monitoring excessive levels of alcohol consumption. No such experiences with group accounting were evident among any of the men interviewed.

Racial Identification

Each of the three were African Americans, three Asian Americans, and two three women who identified themselves as Jews mentioned being treated differently at RBU, primarily by white students who had had little or no previous contact with other racial/ethnic groups. While none of the minority group students spoke of consciously self-segregating themselves, all acknowledged that they felt more comfortable hanging around with other students of similar race or ethnicity. Majority students, on the other hand, seemed to resent the fact that racial/ethnic minorities seemed to self-segregate and intentionally rebuff overtures for contact and friendship. Most majority students said that, after having been rebuffed a few times, they had given up trying to make contact with racial/ethnic minorities. The result is a campus whose social environment is at least somewhat segregated informally by race and ethnicity.

Institutional Climate

The answers to the question, "What's special about this place?" were more global than specific. Instead of mentioning people, events, activities, or experiences, most commented that "just being here and being a part of RBU" was the specialness of RBU. There seemed to be great pride taken in being a part of a larger picture called "RBU." Students mentioned a somewhat undefined "spirit" which pervades the campus, which they felt and with which they identified. One student commented that one can go almost anyplace in the country and find someone who went to RBU. For a lot of students, the social life and being with other RBU students was special. Again, there was little or no mention of any academic experiences that made the place special.

Where the "Real Learning" Takes Place

Students answered this question in two somewhat distinct ways. A few said simply, "In my classes," but most interpreted this question as "What real learning has taken place?" And here a familiar and powerful theme emerged. While RBU is an

overwhelming place requiring considerable effort to cope, when one does conquer the place, there is a great feeling of accomplishment, independence, autonomy, confidence, and increased self esteem. "Making it all by myself" was very important to these students. Many commented they had learned more about dealing with people.

SECTION 5: SOUTHWEST COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Setting

Southwest Community College is part of a large community college district, a system of 8 colleges and two skill centers located throughout a major southwestern city's greater metropolitan area. Although SCC is the smallest college in the district, it has the highest proportion of minorities among the community colleges in the district. Fall 1991 data indicate an enrollment of 3, 288 students. Whites are the largest cohort (46.7%), followed by Hispanics (33.6%), blacks (15.5%), American Indians (2.6%), Asians (1.3%), and foreign students (.4%). Located along beautiful mountain surroundings, SCC has had a controversial beginning. SCC is bordered by a largely minority community on the north side and a relatively affluent neighborhood on the south side. The college prides itself on having a nurturing, accommodating and physically safe environment. As students revealed to us, however, many outsiders still view SCC and the surrounding neighborhood as dangerous, gang infested and comprised primarily of working class, low income Hispanics and blacks who do not view higher education as a priority. Nonetheless, SCC continues to defy its detractors and operates on "the philosophy that an educational institution serves as a catalyst for the growth of a diversified population and as a resource for responding to the changing needs of its communities by providing a variety of educational opportunities in transfer, occupational, developmental and general studies programs and support services to enhance personal and academic development as well as employability" (SCC 1991-92 catalog p. 1).

Respondents

The respondents in our study were as diverse as the community college itself. We were impressed by the great sacrifices many students had made to attend college: students who worked two jobs while taking a full-time load, a single mother who was returning to school after 21 years, the students who rode the bus at six a.m. from north of the city to attend classes at SCC, immigrant students learning to speak English, American Indian students getting used to life away from the reservation, the disabled student who came to SCC to retrain for another career, as well as the more traditional students whose parents expected them to attend college. This cross section of students reflected a predominantly non-traditional college student population -- a cohort that, with great determination and courage, struggled with the

multiple demands of work, family, culture and school. For the most part, these students were, as London (1989) describes, "breaking away" -- students undergoing powerful transitions that were just beginning to have an impact on their lives. For the most part, these students were not representative of traditional college-going students where separation from family, peer networks and culture is prescribed. Rather, these students were experiencing powerful life changes, although they could not yet fully articulate or comprehend the experience or the ultimate impact college would have on their lives.

We interviewed 22 students, 14 of whom were women. Two of the students were American Indians, while the remaining 20 students included 7 Hispanic students, 6 Black students, and 7 white students. The age of the students also varied. The younger students were those who were attending SCC immediately after high school graduation.

Some of these students had passed up other two-and four-year colleges in favor of SCC. Almost all expressed a strong satisfaction with the SCC nurturing environment and small classes.

The remainder of the case study describes the themes that emerged from the Interviews with these SCC students.

Cultural Continuation vs. Cultural Disjunction

For non-traditional students from low social origins, especially where the student is the first to attend college, the transition from high school to college is often a traumatic decision that represents a conscious move to overcome socio-economic inequalities. Yet, making this conscious decision often represents a painful break from cultural conventions and traditions. When making transitions, students begin to experience the agony of choice (London, 1989). In choosing college, they may also begin to realize that they are allowing their identities to change and to experience cultural disjunction. In our study, most students viewed college as a means to an end, often a better, high paying job or a better life for their children. Traditional students did not necessarily relate college-going behavior with cultural disjunction, but non-traditional students viewed higher education as a vehicle to escape despair. But to escape despair, the price of cultural dislocation inevitably entered into the decision to attend college.

A young white woman who had transferred from Northern Arizona University because she was recruited to play baseball represents a traditional student voice: "My parents always told me that without a good college education I wouldn't be able to get much of a job. I never really thought about not going. I guess I always knew that

I would go to college after high school." An 18 year old white male expresses a similar view: ". . . it was part of my family after high school to go to college. It was just part of the thing. I understand that without a college education, you can't really do much . . . "

Five emotional states appear to be associated with college going behavior for non-traditional students. The first is one of desperation. At this level, students are able to discern economic and social inequalities and yearn to escape their condition. A white single mother returning to school after 21 years articulates the voice of despair: "(My choice) was one of desperation. My husband had just abandoned me and my two children and I had to fight to get on welfare and when I got on welfare, I didn't want to be on welfare. I never used to be on welfare and I called the Governor's Office, and I asked them, 'what can I do to get off welfare?' . . . It was sort of a dream that I didn't know after 21 years -- I thought that education and going to college . . . you had to have some grades from high school like a 3.5 average or something to go to college. I was ignorant that you could go to college and not even have a high school diploma. . ."

The second condition is one of fear, typical of students who had dropped out of college to enter the workforce only to realize that their skills would only take them so far. A 29-year old Hispanic male who had dropped out of college to become a bartender had begun to internalize the fear that comes from the painful reality of life without a college education: "I was scared. I started looking at what other bartenders do with their lives . . . I wanted a career . . . they call bartending a career. They tell me I have a career in bartending. I say 'no,' I don't consider it a career!" This student is representative of an individual who has tested life without higher education and who reaches the painful realization that a working class identity will allow him to reap only limited rewards.

Similarly, the minority students also were representative of the non-traditional student who views college as a means to escape despair. A black student who worked "the graveyard shift, from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. and still was enrolled for 12 units, ultimately wanted to become a doctor: "When I have a family, I want to take care of them financially. I want to be a producer. That's the only way, and I was getting in trouble where I live at and where I've been raised – I wanted to come out of that. Give my kids the best – a future." This student eloquently articulates that college is not only a way out of financial despair, but a means to change his identity from one who receives to one who produces.

A third condition is confusion that occurs as students enter an institutional structure that is totally alien to their own. Representative of a student who finds college strange and confusing is an Hispanic woman who reported: "My mom has pushed me (to go to college) all the time." "(My advisor) explained everything to me including how to study. She's helped me a lot." "You work, go to school and study. It's hard trying to balance work, school, and a boyfriend. I had taken classes before at (another college in the city). It was different. There were strange people telling me to do this and to do that."

The fourth condition is loneliness and guilt that come from feelings associated with sociocultural dislocation.An American Indian student articulates how her concerned mother dramatized the need to get a college education: "Right before she died she took me out away from the reservation and she pointed it out to me and said, 'Do you want to be like this -- sitting around and doing nothing? Or do you want to go on?'" For this student, the harsh reality of the necessity of breaking with cultural expectations and traditions has already been powerfully demonstrated.

Feelings of loneliness and alienation can occur when students are just beginning to come to grips with the demands of the academic and the sociocultural price students pay for attaining a higher education. Rodriguez (1974-75, 1982) writes about the loneliness that never fails to overcome "scholarship boys" as they detach themselves from their family and the culture from which they come. Concomitantly, guilt and nostalgia occur as students become more dislocated. Among our interviewees, one white, single mother who had been in the workplace for 20 years articulated both the excitement and the loneliness of being a college student: "That was the loneliest thing for me. I remember talking to my English instructor, and I wrote an awful lot in my English (class), and I had no one to bounce me off of. A lot of people when I first started college didn't understand why I was coming, weren't supportive, and I would go, 'I got an A.' There wasn't the enthusiasm so I found that I got my support through the instructors. One time I found myself crying because I didn't have anybody to tell what I was learning about. . . I realized I was lonely for people who were supportive of me and what I was trying to do and doing something positive in their lives." For this student, real learning only occurred when she was able to come to grips with the fact that as an individual she was adding to her identity and that her old culture neither recognized or appreciated this change.

The loneliness of living between two worlds is also articulated by an Hispanic male: "I work two jobs (Saturday - Tuesday). I work 'doubles' and 'triples.' I still come to school. It's a lot better; my new friends (in college) push me. My attitude has changed. At Southwest my relationship with my old friends has changed, I want to tell them to wake up and snap out of it. I have friends that have been partying their whole life. Your life changes, you start putting people on the back burner. I have two friends and I noticed things now that I used to like partying and wasting a lot of time. It's not living." In this passage the student appears to assume another identity when coming to college. He appears to have made new friends, changed his attitude towards college and left his old habits and friends behind.

The fifth condition is excitement, associated with students who get "turned on to learning." This experience is apparent in several of the quotations cited above. Regrettably, it is not as evident in as many students as one might hope.

The pattern is clear. For these non-traditional students, either white or minority, the college transition represented a passage that broke their established socio-cultural traditions. For these students college represented more than a means to an end -- it represented a re-definition of identity and a re-fashioning of life itself.

Validating Experiences vs. Unconfirming Experiences

A particularly striking feature about community college students is that most were coming to college, as one woman put it, "wounded," having experienced one or more experiences that cast doubt over their academic capabilities. As the researchers of Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, et al., 1986) discovered, "because so many women are already concerned with self-doubt, doubts imposed from outside seem at best redundant and at worst destructive, confirming the women's own sense of themselves as inadequate knowers" (p. 228). The authors argue that the doubting model of teaching and learning that seems to predominate in colleges and universities is likely to retard, arrest or even reverse the growth of women's minds and spirits.

In our study, the voices of doubt came across loud and clear. One Hispanic student mentioned that she was at SCC because a counselor at another community college had told her she could not possibly learn to speak English. Some knew that their high schools had not prepared them for college. Others had been out of school for 10-20 years and wondered whether they could compete with younger college students. Consequently, the expectations they had of college were often pessimistic. One white woman expected "just to be a number," another expected "to fail" and a black student actually discovered she was a number: " . . . I was a number . . . instead of calling us by our name, (the instructor) would call us by our social security number. There aren't many people in class for him to go through all that, and it's quicker for him to say my name than my number."

An Hispanic woman conveyed her doubts about her academic skills. "Personally, I think I was unprepared for classes like English. I took my assessment test and I thought I was unprepared. I wasn't prepared in high school at all. . . I couldn't have done it in a university."

Yet, by and large, these students had experienced some transforming, validating experiences at their community college. The validating experiences with faculty and coaches were particularly enlightening. A black student disclosed his validating experience with his English teacher: "(Some teachers) just come to school to get paid. She came to school to teach you, plus she knew you had hard times and she understood. It was like if you couldn't come to class one day, the only thing you had to do was call her. . . If something was wrong, she could tell you how she felt. That's what teachers need to do more. Some just treat you like you're a statue." He

reported he "had to work and I appreciated that. I didn't pass English class before, and I'm very happy. When I look at my report card, I want to go to school."

There were other examples of faculty validating students. A white woman recounted that she had expected to get non-caring instructors, "but if you're not there one day, it's like 'Are you sick or something?' They really care." Another white woman who had returned to school after 20 years reported she was amazed that her preconceived notions about faculty had turned out to be wrong: "I did not believe that the instructors would be so personable with each individual and want to teach you." For another student, experiencing immediate grade success proved to validate her in her own eyes as a capable knower: "When you come, you're expecting, you know. . . to be very hard. . . But I did very well. I surprised myself. . . what I'm getting now in my first semester, I'm doing very, very well."

The power of faculty validation through care and understanding had a significant impact on a group of Hispanic students who commented that the teachers wouldn't let them drop out. Subsequently, this caused them to want them to achieve more, because "they make you feel like you owe them." An Hispanic woman crystallizes this feeling: "I think you know that when they put the extra effort for you that you owe it to them to finish and push yourself. You know they don't have to do that. They don't have to call you. They don't have to take or drive your homework to you. That's their gas. They're not getting paid. But it's on their extra time. You feel like they care."

The kinds of academic experiences in which faculty had students participate also served as validation mechanisms. A white woman conveyed that her most important experience was viewing herself on tape in front of a group: "I don't know quite how to say this, but when you hear yourself talk and don't hear what other people say or how they perceive you, and to go to the library and observe this individual that has blossomed into something that I hadn't even been aware. . . I would sit in awe and say, 'that's me. Look at you'. . . And I liked me. I loved the person coming across on tape. When I started here, I didn't have a lot of love. I felt wounded and to see me, it was like I understood how other people perceived me. . . and it made me warm up more and appreciate more the students in my class because I would tell them, 'come on, let's do it, let's go for it.'

The validating experiences students had outside of class proved to be equally important. Most students were getting significant amounts of support from family and peers, who were often the most important people in their lives at the present time. A young black male conveys the importance of this sort of validation. When asked who is the most important person in his life, he replied: "My little brother and my girlfriend. The reason why my little brother is . . . because he is handicapped and coming from the same place, the same mother and father. . . There is no much love

there. And my girlfriend, she supports me. She never turns me down. . . (she) just helps me. And you need that when you're going to school and growing up." An Hispanic male conveys the importance of his mother: "She's like my best friend. She's worked hard all her life, and has only had a third grade education. . . and the lady knows how to write. She's always calling folks. If she could learn by calling folks, then I could go to school to do better." In other cases, parents served as encouragement agents and information disseminators who helped students make informed decisions.

"The Real Learning": Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

While it was not the focus of this study to investigate learning styles, some patterns of learning emerged that should be of interest to community college faculty. According to Claxton and Murrell (1987) "studies in academic contexts have demonstrated that field dependence - independence is a significant variable in a student's selection of major, course and career (p. 9)." It would seem important that faculty and administrators understand where and how learning is taking place, not only to inform teaching practices, but to understand and carry out their roles in a diverse organizational culture.

Most students interviewed at SCC were field sensitive learners, relying on extrinsic stimuli to facilitate learning. We heard comments like "learning takes place in classroom discussions," and "I learn more through classroom discussion than from lectures," and "real learning takes place in the patio area because somebody is always experiencing something that you want to experience, so they tell you about it. It's interesting, and they want to share it with you." Other students said learning occurred at home, through tutoring and with "friends who know a little more than you," as well as "everywhere." A white student explained the kind of learning that takes place at the college's picnic tables: "Like when you're studying for an exam and you don't think you understand and you explain it to another student, and all of the sudden, 'click,' you understand. That's when you really know you understand and you can do it." Another white student mused that her working roommate had learned as much as she did through their out-of-class interactions.

However, the portrait of students as learners also includes those who were field insensitive learners, students who felt real learning was intrinsic in nature. A white male who was a retired urban and strategic planner reflected this learning style: "I think real learning in anything is within yourself. A person has to want to learn, and the instructors and the school can guide them. But it's up to the person to learn." A white woman who is a reverse transfer student agrees: "Real learning comes from what you want to learn. I think life has a lot to do with it. I think you have to have a goal. If you're just going through college just to be there, you're not going to make it."

Connectedness vs. Unconnectedness

Student involvement has often been cited in the literature about college students as a variable critical to student persistence (Study Group on The Conditions of Higher Education, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). Consequently, we were interested in how students became involved, both in- and out-of-college, and the impact of those involvements on student learning and growth. The connections students make in-and out-of-college can have a potent impact on persistence and overall academic growth. The feeling of connectedness, like the feeling of validation, can empower individuals to begin to believe not only that they can learn, but also that they can succeed. As students were "breaking away," they also seemed to be "reaching out" to some way of feeling integrated. For some, feelings of belonging occurred outside of class and for others within the social structure of the college. Yet other students still had not experienced a feeling of connectedness with the institutional culture.

This lack of connectedness was especially true for some black students. One black male said he felt "like a leper" at the college. He went on to explain that the only activity he had been involved in was a fashion show, "but since then I haven't seen anyone." Black students believed there were a lot of cliques, . . . "A lot of people haven't matured to the college level and a lot of them also went to high school here and they stay together. That's just how it is." Another black male indicated he did not want any close relationship with faculty: "I think what happens is that if you get on the same level with the instructor, you take a relationship for granted and start expecting something in class. Like friends. You get mad if you get a bad grade. You lose a friend." Work responsibilities were keeping some students from being involved. According to one black female, ". . . This is my first year of working and going to school at the same time, so when I get off work really late, I don't want to get up early and go to class the next morning."

Yet, feelings of involvement did permeate through the group and occurred in different ways. An older, disabled black man who was not employed indicated how he felt connected: "It's through meeting with different instructors, computer class, . . . lab assistance, talking with people on the campus. . . Say 'hello' to somebody. . . Most everybody will say 'hello,' so I like to say 'hello' back to them. . . The faculty . . . is friendly and helpful, and it's just a nice place to be."

Many students reported making in-class connections. A white woman recounted what happened in her literature class: "The teacher paired you up with someone, and you ask this person information and then you present it. And that way you get to know everybody in the class, and specifically the person you were introducing. Another white woman related that teachers gave them "all the phone numbers and everything."

While most students were initially meeting people in class, once they established these connections, a whole new world seemed to open up for them. Said a white, single mother: "After you've met (other students), I can't walk into Fry's now; I can't walk anywhere I've not seen someone I went to school with. Initially, I think that was the first breaking point and then taking the time to get to know them. Now they're everywhere." Still other students recalled how they met new friends at the college's picnic tables or even riding the bus. An older black male made reference to the camaraderie he felt with his fellow classmates, and he referred to staff people as "gentle." Other students reported meeting people in the gameroom and the TV room "playing video games and stuff."

Being involved in sports was another way of making connections. A white woman indicated that being on the volleyball team immediately involved her in school: "You're walking around after your finals and (teachers will) come up and tell you how you did. I totally feel a part of this school." Another white woman who played basketball agreed: "A lot of teachers support you. A lot of people support you. . . They'll come up and say 'that was a good game or I'm sorry you lost.' Some people you don't even know; they know your name." Students who participated in sports and organizations such as the Psychology Club, Christian Club and International Club also expressed feelings of connectedness.

The pattern that emerged relative to the theme of connectedness was that involved students felt more comfortable and more excited about school and learning. They also saw their world expanding, meeting new friends and viewing faculty as validating agents.

Comfort vs. Discomfort

The comfort level of students has been associated with student persistence (Fleming, 1984; Wooten, 1990). For example, Johnson-Parrot (1988) studied the personal comfort experienced by black students in a rural community college. Among his findings is the importance of the quality of social and academic interaction. Lack of opportunities for black students to interact in a favorable social way may lead to feelings of alienation and isolation, adversely effect the students' sense of self-worth, and limit enriching experiences which could influence the decision to leave the institution. Moreover, the classroom environment and its features such as interpersonal influences, group norms, and intra-group communication, can influence not only comfort level, but various aspects of student learning behavior.

Given the rise of racial incidents at colleges and universities throughout the country, Hayes (1988) conducted a study that found that many black students assume that racism has been eliminated in college. According to Hayes (1988), when racial

incidents occur, they are keenly distressing to black students who have no perception of what took place in the 1960s. Moreover, many black students find that some white faculty and administrators can be as insensitive and as uncaring as some white students. Also, white cultural and social events tend to dominate over those of blacks. Caught in a whirlwind of confusing identities, black students often struggle to overcome perceptions that they are all special admits and may often find themselves forced to adhere to white cultural norms that may cause them to abandon their own cultural roots. The voices of SCC students confirmed some of these research findings.

While most students reported feelings of comfort with their new cultural environment, some students remained guarded, especially the black students who were able to discern the subtle nature of discrimination. A young black male explained that people have stereotypes: "A lot of people assume that if you're on a scholarship, all you want to do is play basketball. Right out people assume if you're black, you play basketball." Another black male who moved from Oregon explained he felt people here were reluctant to say hello to him, "they just want to do what they have to do without any social contact."

Yet another black male revealed that some of the teachers "didn't really understand teaching black kids." This student understood he was different, and that some faculty members might feel uncomfortable teaching students like him: "It was like -- like up tight when they're teaching, they won't be themselves, like they're under pressure. We don't need that. When you're teaching black kids, you have to be true and honest, instead of hide." Another black male explains that he "had one teacher that was kind of weird. Like she was scared almost. Because most people in my class were minorities. She was white. Her voice was shaky, like she didn't have any confidence in her class."

But it was the white students who communicated the greatest feelings of safety and comfort at this, the most multicultural of all the district's community colleges. They not only felt safe; they felt the preconceived stereotyping of the college by their friends was ludicrous. They reported that individuals who lived in other parts of the city would ask if SCC had security, and that their friends would only visit in the daytime and then did not want to park their cars in the SCC area. Interviewed students were able to overcome these prejudices both with the values their parents had taught them and with the safe experience they had discovered at SCC: "I went to a white school. So when I was coming home my friends said, 'Oh, you're going to be the only white person on campus.' And that bothered me. But I see it work now. You just don't look anymore. It doesn't seem to bother me." A white woman captured the overall feelings of the group when she said, "It's fine nobody knows. We'll continue our education. We'll keep small classes and let them stay ignorant."

The lesson learned by both majority and minority students was that it was possible to co-exist in a multicultural campus environment. A white woman who had adopted a Spanish surname when she married, explains the comfort she developed attending SCC: "Here I feel completely undiscriminated against no matter what my last name is or what I look like. All the races are here, and there is no predominant. It's equal here." The college experience for most of these students had become not divisive, but unifying. A white woman conveyed the power of this perspective: "We're talking the same language, you know we've got goals in our lives and it isn't like we're -- She's a blood, she's a crypt,' this and that . . . we're students . . . we're unified in that manner. We are all here to learn."

Discussion

The analysis of transcripts and field notes yielded five conclusions about the community college student population we studied. First, the transition from high school to college or from a work environment to college is more difficult for non-traditional students than for traditional students. For traditional students college-going was an expected behavior, a part of family traditions and values that provided continuity to cultural norms. In many cultures separation from parents and the culture in which the individual grows up is less traumatic. On the other hand "breaking away" -- separation for first generation students, as well as for students where college-going values are not firmly entrenched in the family unit -- may cause a traumatic geographic, emotional, cognitive, and moral separation (London, 1989). In our study cultural disjunction was met with any of five emotional states: 1) desperation, as students recognize that their existing condition is so unfulfilling and unequal that they must find a vehicle that serves as a flight from despair; 2) fear, typical of students who discover that their working environment is structured to provide rewards primarily to those with higher qualifications than they presently have; 3) confusion and anxiety, for students who become overwhelmed by negotiating new conventions in a world that is totally different than the one from which they come; 4) loneliness and guilt, stemming from the not-yet-fully comprehended notion that identities are experiencing powerful changes, and 5) excitement, as some students begin to reap the intellectual rewards of higher learning.

Several cautions are in order here. The emotional states described above may not happen in sequential order for all students. In fact, further research is needed about the subtle and complex ways community college students negotiate separation. Moreover, cultural disjunction does not necessarily imply that all students need or want to separate totally from their culture to attain success (Rendon, forthcoming) and further research should probe how non-traditional students maintain or reject their personal cultural integrity and succeed or fail in college as a result of this process. In effect, not all students are like Richard Rodriguez (1982), who attributes his academic success to shedding his Mexican American identity. In effect there are

many college students who maintain strong ethnic affiliation values and achieve a moderate to excellent level of academic success (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Rendon, forthcoming). Finally, London (1989) cautions that being the first in one's family to attend college should not imply that this is a sign of poor family (or cultural) functioning, since individuation and separation may be negotiated well or not well in any given family or culture regardless of the educational attainment of its members.

A second conclusion is that early validation experiences are critical to student learning and growth. The authors of Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, et al.,1986) assert that most women come to the academy consumed with self-doubt and exposed to a series of unconfirming experiences, only to discover that confirmation as a thinker and as a member of an intellectual community often comes at the conclusion of the college years. These authors argue that "for women, confirmation and community are prerequisites rather than consequences of development" (p. 194).

In our study students articulated the voices of doubt profoundly and eloquently. For the most part, they were coming to the community college consumed with self-doubt, expecting to fail or to become "a number." Yet what had saved these students, what had transformed them into believing in their innate capacity to learn, were the numerous validating experiences encountered in the community college. Validation came in different forms, both in-and out-of-class. Nurturant faculty were able to convey the sense that students were not seen as "statues," but as fully functioning human beings. Faculty who gave students their home phone numbers or drove to their homes to take homework assignments were able to generate in students the feeling that teachers were supportive to the extent that students began to believe their teachers would not allow them to drop out. And faculty who structured academic experiences that allowed students to experience themselves as powerful knowers instilled motivation and drive to succeed. Counselors and faculty who knew students by name made some students feel special. Yet, the out-of-class validation experiences proved to be equally powerful. Family and friends served as significant others who served as role models and encouragement agents.

A third conclusion is that "real learning" is not restricted to the classroom, and that the nature of student learning may be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Most of our students were field sensitive learners, relying on extrinsic stimuli to facilitate learning. These students learned as much from conversations they had with students in the patio area or at home with their family and friends as they did through in-class discussions. Yet, we also found field insensitive learners -- students who felt the real learning was intrinsic in nature. These students believed it was the student's responsibility to learn, they had to want to learn, and that faculty could only do so much to facilitate the learning process. These findings reflect both the diverse nature of student learning styles and the variety of places in which learning takes place. Additional research is needed to probe more into how students learn and how

community colleges can structure a learning environment that accommodates a variety of learning strategies and teaching approaches.

A fourth conclusion is that student involvement is critical to student learning, growth and feelings of self-worth. While this conclusion represents nothing new in the literature about college students, it does require us to inquire into how community colleges -- essentially commuter institutions where clients often have conflicting work schedules -- can structure an academic and social environment that allows students to make connections and to help them feel academically and socially integrated. In our study, it was the black students who felt less connected, and ultimately less comfortable with the institutional environment.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly given the nature of community college student part-time enrollment patterns, most of the connections students were making occurred outside of class. Students were meeting other students in-class, but the real connections were being made outside of class -- in grocery stores, at picnic tables, riding the bus, in the gameroom. Students involved in sports seemed particularly connected because they were able to get encouragement and counseling from their coaches, and because being an athlete brought them a certain recognition from faculty and peers. The validating experiences students had with faculty could be considered as connecting experiences: teachers who gave students their phone numbers, identified students by name, or structured learning situations that allowed students to meet and work closely with students and faculty can be considered vehicles that promote connectedness.

The fifth conclusion is that in multicultural student environments, which in the future are bound to become the norm rather than the exception, the comfort level of both minority and majority students is important to student learning and growth. The institutional culture of higher education is undergoing profound and powerful changes. Community colleges are not new to diversity, and they are probably considered to be among the safest institutions of higher education, given that incidents of racism and discrimination are more frequently reported in four-year college campuses. Nonetheless, black students discerned the subtle presence of discrimination, both in faculty who failed to come across as "true and honest" when teaching black students and in their white peers who often believed they were in college only because of their athletic prowess. Yet, it was heartening to hear students (especially whites) express the view that they not only felt safe at the community college, but that it was indeed possible for diverse ethnic and racial groups to co-exist in the community college. In the end, the prevailing common feature that caused students to transcend ethnic/racial differences was that they were all students and that they were all at SCC to learn.

Listening to community college student voices provides clues toward the direction the colleges' should pursue to make higher education a meaningful reality for all students. Providing for early validation experiences, emphasizing connection over alienation and separation, collaboration over the linear model of teaching where learning flows only from teacher to student, and cultural safety and comfort for all students -- all of these dimensions must be taken into account when designing the Twenty-First Century model of a community college's institutional culture.

SECTION 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Background and Methodological Summary

A substantial body of evidence indicates that students' "involvement" (Astin, 1977, 1985) or the "quality of effort" (Pace, 1984, 1990) they invest in their own education is positively and directly related to the amount of learning and the degree of intellectual and personal change that takes place (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The more effort and energy students invested in the academic and social experiences that comprise a college education, the greater the likelihood that they will reap a wide variety of educational benefits, including greater learning, more extensive and refined personal development, and increased likelihood of persistence and degree attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

While the role of student effort and involvement has been well established, surprisingly little research has been done on the personal and organizational mechanisms and processes by means of which student become "involved." How do new students negotiate the transitions involved in the process where:

> . . . the [new student] in college is a novice in an unfamiliar social organization, and is therefore confronted with the values, norms, and role structures of a new social system and various new subsystems. Such an experience usually involves desocialization (pressures to unlearn certain past values, attitudes, and behavior patterns) as well as socialization (pressures to learn the new culture and participate in the new social structure). . . . [The student, thus,] faces a variety of expected and unexpected academic, intellectual, and social challenges. [The student] must come to grips with both formal and informal demands, with both a public curriculum and . . . an 'invisible curriculum' (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969, p. 89).

Despite the obvious importance of success in students' transitions from high school or work to involvement in the academic and interpersonal context of their institution, only a comparative handful of scholars have examined this process (e.g., London, 1989; Rodriguez, 1974-75). The "Transition to College Project" of the National Center's Out-of-Class Experiences Research Program undertook an exploratory, field-based study of the social contexts in which college students make decisions to attend college, negotiate transitional changes, experience the academic and social contexts of their institutions, and form connections that foster in- and out-of-class involvement. Mover specifically, the project sought answers to the following questions:

- Through what social, academic, and administrative mechanisms do students new to a campus become involved in the academic and social systems of their institutions?

- What processes are involved in the transition from high school or work to college?

- Who are the important people who facilitate or impede that process?

- What experiences play a major positive or negative role in the success or failure of that transition?

- Is the nature of the transition process different for different kinds of students? For similar students entering different kinds of institutions?

Thirty-six focus-group interviews were held with 132 new students on four campuses: Southwest Community College (SCC), a highly multicultural community college in a large, southwestern metropolitan area; Bayfield College (BC), a medium-size, eastern, residential, liberal arts college; Urban State University (USU), an commuter university in a major midwestern city, and Reallybig University (RBU), a large eastern research university. Approximately 42 percent of those interviewed were students of color and 57 percent were women; perhaps 10 percent were adult students. All interviews were tape recorded and transcripts (or, in a few instances, detailed interview notes) were analyzed by all members of the research team both independently and in group sessions.

Conclusions and Implications

The research summarized, here, does not offer definitive conclusions or answers to the questions posed by the study. Rather, the research increases the amount of light shed on these issues. It challenges some conventional beliefs about the transition process identifies dimensions of the transition process worthy of more focused and detailed study, and points to issues of policy and practice that heretofore have not received extensive attention in the thinking, research, or writing on students and how the college experience shapes their growth.

The transition from high school or work to college is an exceedingly complex phenomenon. The nature and dynamics of the process vary according to the student's social, family, and educational background; personality; educational and occupational orientations and aspirations; the nature and mission of the institution being attended; the kinds of peers, faculty, and staff members encountered; the purpose and nature of those encounters, and the interactions of all these variables. The process is a highly interrelated, web-like series of interpersonal, academic, and organizational pulls and

pushes that shape student learning (broadly conceived) and persistence. Despite this sometimes bewildering complexity, however, a number of themes emerged from the interviews, themes which were common across settings. Some, of course, vary within setting or across kinds of students.

Dimensions of the Transition

The Place of College in the Life Trajectory. The educational portion of the middle-class American Dream is one of uninterrupted study and progressively greater academic accomplishment from elementary school through completion of a college degree. For many Americans, primarily (but not exclusively) white Americans, this anticipated trajectory is realized. At Reallybig University and Bayfield College, when asked what had gone into their decision to attend college, virtually all students were surprised by the question, indicating that they had never considered not going to college. Both they and their parents had assumed all along that going to college is what one does after completion of high school. It is simply the next, logical, expected, and desired step in one's life trajectory toward personal and occupational achievement. The trajectory originated in the educational attainment of parents, older siblings, or close relatives who had at least attended, and frequently completed, college (and not infrequently some form of graduate or professional education). The new student from such a background, entering a college like Bayfield or a university like Reallybig has accepted and is simply extending an established set of family and sociocultural values and tradition.

For non-traditional students, the transition is quite different. For many, college-going is not part of their family's lore or expectations. Indeed, those who are the first in their immediate family to attend college are breaking family "tradition," not continuing it. For these students, college attendance involves two transitions, an educational one and a cultural one. In its content, the educational transition is like that of most of the students entering Bayfield or Reallybig: It involves the adaptation to a new set of academic and social systems. But because of their backgrounds, going to college for non-traditional students may also constitute a cultural transition as they enter an academic and social context quite different from the one in which they have grown up. Because attending and completing college promises to make radical changes in these students and the lives they lead. Indeed, for many the decision to go to college is a conscious decision to escape occupational dead-ends and hopelessness. For these students, the stakes and emotional content of the transition are higher. Success in college will mean a major redirection of the life trajectory toward greater physical and financial security, with all the associated benefits. But if the benefits are greater, so are the risks and the fear of failure. For many of these students, the college years are not "the best years," but a deadly serious struggle. Ironically, even "success" in college for these students has its downside: As London

(1989) notes, only when we begin to recognize that

> mobility involves not just gain but loss -- most of all the loss of a familiar past, including a past self -- that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish that first-generation students (experience). . . . modernity creates the potential for biographical and social dislocation, so that freedom of choice, to whatever extent it exists, can also be the agony of choice (p. 168).

The implications of these variations in the nature of the transition process are non-trivial, particularly for non-traditional students. College and university faculty and administrators, particularly those whose backgrounds and college experiences resemble those of the students at Bayfield College and Reallybig University, must first understand the dramatically different character of this process for student from disadvantaged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Such students must reconcile and balance competing demands relating to work, family, culture, and school. Traditional students, by and large, may have to deal with only one or (maybe) two of these demands. Some may have to face three of these demands, but very few will confront all four simultaneously. Increased awareness of the sensitivity of what is happening in non-traditional students' lives is needed, as are policies and programs which recognize and respond to these differences.

High School Friends: Assets and Liabilities. The interviews also made clear that high school friends are instrumental in how successfully new students make the transition to college. When a student knows high school friends who are also new students (or friends or siblings already enrolled) at the same institution, these pre-college friends function during the early weeks or months of college as a bridge from one academic and interpersonal environment to the next. Such earlier acquaintances provide (and may themselves receive) important support during the transition. Friends perform this "bridge function," however, for a limited period of time. As a student's friendship network begins to extend beyond the set of high school acquaintances, the student develops closer relationships with students not known before college, and high school friends slowly fade in importance. While high school friends who go to the same college may serve a similar function for new students at Southwest Community College and Urban State University, high school friends who do not go on to college may serve to complicate and hinder the transition. Such high school friends may function as interpersonal anchors, tending to hold the student in the network of friends and pattern of activities and interests of the pre-college years.

Institutions might facilitate the transition process by helping new students identify and locate already-enrolled students from their high school or community. Peer counselors and "big brother" and "big sister" programs have been shown to be generally successful in helping new students during the orientation period. New

students at Bayfield College, for example, noted the helpfulness of the POSSEs (Peers Offering Support Services for Education). It would seem reasonable to expect that such peer mentors who know something about the schools from which students come may be even more effective, particularly for non-traditional students. Having another student with whom to talk, particularly one who may already have successfully dealt with the personal and family disjunctions described by London, may be a crucial feature in helping new students make connections with the institution and increasing their prospects for success and persistence.

The Family: Asset and Liability. There can be little doubt about the important role new students' families play in providing encouragement to attend college and to persist and succeed while there. With very few exceptions, when asked "Who are the most important people in your life right now?", students unhesitatingly named one or more members of their immediate family. The sense of debt to parents for their support was greater among students at SCC and USU, but it was evident even at BC and RBU. Among students at the latter two institutions, the more muted response seems to reflect more their taking parental support for granted rather than an indication that they may enjoy any less parental support than their commuting peers. Residential students appear to be developing greater personal independence and autonomy from family and, thereby, to be redefining the nature of the relationship they have with parents to be one more of the equality of adults than the superordinate-subordinate parent-child relationship.

For some students, however, particularly those from Black, Hispanic, or Indian families, some parents may try to maintain a relationship they recognize may be changing. This dimension of the transition process for these students, of course, is intimately related to the cultural disjunctions described above. Some parents may well recognize that their college-going children -- as proud of them as they are -- may, metaphorically, never return home. Sensing such fears, the students of these parents find their anxiety levels rising in ways and to degrees unimagined by most middle-class white students, faculty members, and administrators.

Such parental and student stress indicates a need for greater attention in orientation and first-year programs to involve parents more directly and actively. Parents of first-generation students must be helped to understand the nature of the demands that will be placed on their children, what will be happening to them, and how to deal with the stresses parents feel and pass on to their college-going children. Many institutions currently involve parents in their orientation programs, but the parents of first-generation students may need levels of involvement and support equal to those provided to their children.

The Importance of "Validating" Experiences. A number of the lower socioeconomic status students who had entered the two commuting institutions were consumed with self-doubt due to unconfirming experiences they had in high school. These experiences signal students in various and subtle ways that they are not seen as serious or competent learners and, thus, are expected to fail. These experiences fail to "confirm" or "validate" the student as one capable of learning and deserving of a place in a college classroom. Consequently, these students come to college expecting to be simply "a number" and to fail. By and large, however, students at SCC and USU reported transforming, validating experiences: teachers who communicated to their students that they were capable of learning, who took their homework to their homes when they were ill, and who structured learning activities that allowed students to experience themselves as successful learners. Out-of- class validation was equally important, and came from the support of family and peers, who (as noted above) were often the most important people in the students' lives.

In contrast, students attending the two predominantly white, residential institutions had already experienced academic encouragement and success in elementary and secondary school and were further validated academically simply by being accepted by their institutions. For these students, the importance of the validation process was more social (being accepted by their peers) than academic.

Whether academically or socially (and there are decided variations across institutional types), new students need to be reassured that they can succeed: that they can do college level work, that their ideas and opinions have value, that they are worthy of the attention and respect of faculty, staff, and peers alike. Faculty members must be made aware of the importance of such early reaffirmation, particularly for students for whom college attendance is such an emotionally risky venture. The "wounds" some students bring to college must be understood and accorded the attention, support, and gentleness they require. The validation of students need not be formal (e.g., graded work). It might take the form of words of encouragement, of constructive and reassuring critiques of student answers or work. The message may take many forms, but its content must be consistent and clear: students can learn, they are valuable as people, their experiences and ideas have legitimacy in and out of the classroom, and the instructor and institution are there to help the student learn.

An important policy issue resides beneath the importance of validating students' worth and performance. There is reason to believe that such validation is critical to student persistence and degree attainment. If access to occupational success and "the good life" is not be restricted according to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender, then all students must have an equal opportunity to benefit from their educational experience (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Moreover, in many of our interviews with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there were

clear indications of altruistic motives for wanting to go to college -- not simply to rescue oneself from a grim future, but also to give something back to family and community. Civic and community interest and a sense of obligation to one's community are apparent in what many students had to say. Denying such students the opportunities not only to attend but to succeed closes the door on potential social and economic multiplier effects that college completion may produce.

The Transition and the "Real Learning." When asked "Where does the real learning occur around here?", a number of students, as might be expected, spoke of the classroom and various formal instructional activities, or of the preparations made for class. When encouraged to define "learning" broadly, however, it was clear that for a substantial number, the "real learning" meant learning about one's self, discovering abilities or personal sources of strength, developing pride in one's ability to survive, and becoming more independent and self-reliant. Such learning included developing "survival" skills (e.g., money and time management skills, personal goal-setting); developing the self-discipline to "just do it" when a task or obligation was recognized; taking responsibility for one's physical, financial, and academic well-being, and developing a clearer understanding of one's self and goals through interactions with faculty and peers who held goals, attitudes, or values different from the student's. For some residential students, the transition represented an opportunity to explore a "new self," to try-on a different "persona," to redesign's one's self in ways that were impossible for students living at home. For some non-traditional students, as described above, the transition required a redefinition of self and values.

The most consistent element of this theme, however, was the pride students took in their achievement. Students who had made the transition were highly satisfied with what they had accomplished. New vistas opened up, new abilities were discovered, new goals were considered -- and all these things gave these students deep personal satisfaction.

The Transition as a Cooperative Activity. For residential students, the transition was an ordeal to be shared and experienced together. There was strength in numbers and some solace in the thought that "we're all in this together." It appeared to be seen as the process (if not rite) of passage that one must make on the road to "a good job." What they were going through was to be expected and part of the process of beginning "the college experience." For most (but by no means all), it was a time of exploration, wonder, discovery, and fun. The cooperative character of the process meant helping one another meet and make new friends, establish one's social network and become established in those of others.

In the voices of many non-traditional students, while many of these same elements were apparent, their volume was more muted. There was also the sense, emanating from the dual nature of the transition as both an educational and cultural

passage, that these were serious, potentially dangerous waters. These students supported one another by consciously avoiding criticism of another's work or performance. The cooperative nature of the passage was evident in students' discussing classwork together outside class, learning from the comments others made in class, making sure too much fun didn't interfere with getting school work done, reminding each other in subtle ways that academics were the first priority. In some instances, the cooperative nature of the transition was brought directly into the classroom, as instructors required students to learn about, and then introduce, a classmate; constructed group assignments that required students to get to know each other and to work together on a common project, or invested so much of their own energy and time in helping students that the students came to feel a positive obligation to work hard to succeed.

* * * * *

These findings and themes have a number of implications for policy and practice:

1. The nature and experiences of the transition process vary considerably depending upon student background and kind of institution attended. Orientation programs at all colleges and universities need to be cognizant of, and responsive to, these differences.

2. Similarly, faculty members must be apprised of the characteristics of the students attending their institution in general, and of the students in their classes in particular. Institutional data centers should be required to produce appropriate reports automatically (as soon as students register) and to send them to the relevant faculty members. Meaningful alterations in teaching styles and techniques, as well as the development of new learning experiences for increasingly diverse students, cannot be effective if designed in the dark.

3. Greater care and attention needs to be given by admissions, academic, and student affairs staff to the parents of first-generation college students so that they might better understand the demands and stress associated with attending college, and the special stresses of being the first in one's family to do so.

4. Prospects for a successful transition can be enhanced if faculty and administrative staff members are sensitive and responsive to all students' need for early confirmation of their abilities to succeed (although serious, good-faith effort may be required). For non-traditional students, satisfaction of this need may be especially critical and could be decisive with respect to students' persistence and ultimate degree attainment. The formal and informal means by which an institution sends subtle signals to students about how important they

are to the institution should be reviewed and corrected where the signals being sent are negative ones. Faculty participation in these critical reviews is essential.

5. What happens to students outside the classroom shape in important ways how students respond inside the classroom, and vice versa. While the implications of this are hardly new, academic and student affairs divisions on a campus must come to see and respond to the interlocking character of students' in- and out-of-class experiences. Academic affairs administrators and faculty must recognize that substantial and important learning goes on outside of class, and student affairs administrators must begin to consider how the activities and programs of their division relate to the academic/intellectual mission of the institution.

6. In some ways, perhaps no theme was more persistent throughout the interviews -- regardless of race or ethnicity, gender, age, or institution attended -- than new students' need for self-esteem in its many variant forms: self-confidence, a sense of being in control, pride in oneself and what one does, respecting oneself and being respected by others, valuing oneself and being valued by others. The perception of value in oneself is apparent in such themes identified above as the dual character of the transition process for non-traditional students, in the need for validation from faculty and peers (whether the validation is of an academic or interpersonal nature), in the need for connectedness and a sense of belonging at the institution, in the move to personal independence and autonomy, in proving oneself capable of success, however the individual defines that concept.

If "involvement" is a central mechanism by which students maximize the range and extent of their learning opportunities, the route to "involvement" remains circuitous and as-yet poorly mapped one. This research project has identified a number of the dimensions of the transition individuals make from high school or work to college and suggested places where institutions and policy makers might intervene to facilitate the successful passage for most new students. Its purpose has been to shed some light on the nature of the process for different kinds of students attending different kinds of institutions and to identify some of the elements and dynamics of that process for additional examination.

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APPENDICES

NATIONAL CENTER ON POSTSECONDARY
Teaching, Learning, & Assessment

The Pennsylvania State University, 403 South Allen Street, Suite 104, University Park, PA 16801-5202
(814) 865-5917 FAX: (814) 865-3638 BITNET: NCTLA@PSUVM

October 30, 1991

Dr. [redacted] President
[redacted]

Dear President [redacted]

It has been our pleasure to work with Vice President [redacted], and [redacted] to arrange a research visit to [redacted] on November 25-26, 1991. The research that is planned is part of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, a five-year, $5.9 million effort funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement to enhance undergraduate education. Overall, the National Center's research will involve more than 5,000 students on more than 20 campuses. The five main research programs included in this Center are described in the attached gray brochure. [redacted] is participating in the research program that focuses on students' out-of-class experiences. It is our great good fortune that your assistant, [redacted], happens to have expertise in this area.

As the enclosed (tan-colored) flyer about the Out-of-Class Experiences project explains, we are trying to learn more about the processes and mechanisms by means of which new freshmen become (or fail to become) active and involved participants in the academic community on their campus. Drs. Kevin Allison, Susan Millar, and myself will be conducting open-ended interviews with groups of your students in order to find answers to such questions as: How do students new to an institution develop friendship groups on campus? For students of traditional age, what interpersonal processes are involved in the transition from high school to college? Who initiates interpersonal interactions between students and faculty? On what basis and when do students choose "mentors" or role models, whether faculty members or other students?

We have discussed with [redacted] our concern that student participation in these group interviews be entirely voluntary, and that this be made clear to them. Moreover, the perspectives that students share with us will remain anonymous, and the identity of your institution will also remain anonymous in all publications resulting from the study. (We would, of course, like to recognize [redacted] contribution to the Center by listing [redacted] in informational materials along with other institutions who are assisting us. We will not do that, however, without your express consent.) We

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Dr. [redacted]
October 30, 1991
Page Two

plan to send to [redacted] copies of any reports that we write that are based on interviews done at [redacted] It is our hope that these will be of direct value to you, and of indirect value to a much wider higher education audience.

In closing, we wish to say that we are very grateful for [redacted] support of our activities. Moreover, we are impressed by the high level of commitment and hospitality that [redacted], and [redacted] have already shown us. We look forward to our continued association with [redacted].

Sincerely,

Patrick T. Terenzini

Patrick Terenzini
Professor and Associate Director

PT:sjk
Enclosures

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Teaching, Learning, & Assessment

The Pennsylvania State University, 403 South Allen Street, Suite 104, University Park, PA 16801-5202
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November 8, 1991

Ms. [redacted]
Assistant to the President
[redacted]

Dear Ms [redacted]

I was pleased to hear from you this morning. I also wish to thank you again for sending us materials about [redacted] including your paper on the 1990 freshman experience at [redacted]. Per our conversation, we enclose a WordPerfect file copy of the letter that you will be sending to the students who will be participating, plus Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Center stationary, copies of the Out-of-Class study information sheet, and stamped envelopes. I have amended the letter by putting the titles of each of the three possible senders, and anticipate that you and your staff will decide which of these names will appear on each letter, and that you will sign the letters for us.

At this time, we anticipate three meetings for Dr. Allison on Monday, November 25, to take place for one hour each, beginning at 11:00 a.m., 1:00 a.m., and 6:00 p.m. In turn, Dr. Terenzini and I each will have two meetings on Monday, one at 11:00 a.m., and one at 1:00 p.m., and one on Tuesday, beginning at 11:00 a.m. We also anticipate meeting you in your office at 9:30 a.m. on Monday. At that time, you will provide us with a final list of interviewees, times, and places, and will give us directions for finding the three rooms in which the interviews will take place. As I mentioned on the phone, we will ~~either~~ provide honoraria to the students either at the interviews, or through the mail.

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Ms [redacted]
November 8, 1991
Page Two

My colleagues and I will be reading your focus group report, and anticipate discussing your findings during our meeting on the 25th. Once again, we are delighted by your commitment to our project, and thankful for your efforts on our behalf. Pat Terenzini or I will be happy to respond to any questions you have about our visit to [redacted].

Sincerely,

Susan

Susan B. Millar, Ph.D.
Research Associate

SBM:sjk
Enclosures

cc: Dr. Patrick Terenzini
Dr. Kevin Allison

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Teaching, Learning, & Assessment

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November 12, 1991

Mr. [redacted]

Dear Mr. [redacted]:

Ms. [redacted], Assistant to the President, and [redacted]'s Vice President of Student Affairs, have advised me of your willingness to meet with me for an interview during the week of November 25, 1991. Because your participation is entirely voluntary, I am very grateful for your time.

[redacted] is participating in research projects being conducted by the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, a five-year, $5.9 million effort funded by the U.S. Department of Education to improve undergraduate education. One of the Center's research projects focuses on students' out-of-class experiences, and my interview with you is part of that project. Overall, the National Center's research will involve more than 5,000 students on more than 20 campuses.

As the attached description of this particular project explains, we want to learn more about how students' experiences outside the classroom influence what and how they learn. In the part of the study in which you are participating, we want to learn how students make the transition to college. This portion of the project is being conducted through open-ended interviews with small groups of students.

Our interview should last an hour, and if your schedule permits, may continue on for another half hour. While I anticipate that you and the other students will do most of the talking during this time, there is nothing you need to do to prepare for our interview. **Please be assured that your responses will be completely confidential and not associated with you personally in any way. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at the number above.**

My colleagues and I believe that this study has the potential to help college faculty and administrators make decisions that will improve the learning climate for students. I look forward to our interview and see it as an important contribution to our study. Thank you again for reserving time to meet with me.

Sincerely,

Patrick Terenzini

Patrick Terenzini
Professor and Associate Director

IMPORTANT INTERVIEW INFORMATION

Date:	**Monday, November 25, 1991**
Time:	**1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.**
Place:	**[redacted] University Center** **Mezzanine Level** **Room 206B**

NATIONAL CENTER ON POSTSECONDARY
Teaching, Learning, & Assessment

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Informed Consent: Please Read

RESEARCH PROGRAM ON STUDENTS' OUT-OF-CLASS EXPERIENCES

Project Purposes: The National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment seeks to discover what facilitates college student learning and to enhance the educational effectiveness of current institutional, state, and federal policies, programs, and practices. Important as the curriculum and classroom activities are in shaping student learning, ample evidence indicates that these are not the only important influences on what and how students learn. Thus, the purpose of the National Center's Research Program on students' Out-of-Class Experiences is to explore how these interpersonal encounters influence students' learning, learning-related attitudes and values, and degree completion. More specifically, this research program will try to answer two basic questions: 1) How do entering students become active and involved participants in an academic community?, and 2) How do students' out-of-class experiences, particularly their interpersonal interactions with other students and with faculty members, reinforce and augment -- or interfere with -- curricular and classroom learning and the achievement of broader general education goals? We are particularly interested in how the consequences or outcomes of these out-of-class experiences may vary according to certain student characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and age) or to the kind of institution students attend (e.g., two- vs. four-year, commuter vs. residential).

Project Design: This portion of the National Center's research will be based on small group, focused interviews of approximately one and a half hours duration. Students who are new to the institution will be interviewed in groups of 4-8. Interview groups will vary according to gender, race/ethnicity, age, and (as appropriate) whether students live on-campus or commute.

Project Staffing: With the exception of one member, the research group for this project is based at The Pennsylvania State University. It includes Drs. Kevin Allison, Susan B. Millar, Laura Rendon (of Arizona State University), Patrick T. Terenzini (group coordinator), M. Lee Upcraft, and Ms. Patti Gregg.

NOTE: **Participation in these interviews is entirely voluntary. All information gathered will be held in strict professional confidence and used only for research purposes. Any quotations will not be personally identifiable.**

PENNSTATE

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Out-of-Class Experiences Research Program
Transition to College Project

REVISED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

POINTS TO HIT:1. Remind students participation is voluntary.
2. Ask permission to tape.
3. Give "Big Picture" overview of study's purpose.
4. Remind them there are no right/wrong, good/bad answers, here. Not everyone experience will be the same.
5. As ice-breaker, as for brief self-introductions. Tell about yourself and ask students to tell their:
   First name
   Intended major (or if undecided, what is current preference
   Possible career goals (if any)
   Working? Where? # of hours?
   (Family?)

Pre-College Information

1. Tell me about what went into your decision to go to college.

Expectations and Reality

2. Why did you choose (institution)? [Probe: Who or what influenced you to come here instead of going somewhere else?]

3. What did you expect and what did you find when you got here? [Focus on experiences, students, and faculty if students don't.]

Significant People/Events

4. Who are the most important people in your life right now and why are they important? [If no one at the institution is mentioned, prompt for it. If no one outside the institution is mentioned, prompt for it.]

5. What would you say are the most important kinds of experience you've had since enrolling here? [Prompt for formal organizations, clubs, programs if needed.]

   Probe: What about experiences you've had: Off-Campus? On-Campus?

6. How (if at all) has the group of people you hang out with changed since coming to (institution)? [Why?]

7. Think about the faculty and staff people you know here. How did you meet them and get to know them?

The Transition

8. How (if at all) do you feel involved, a part of, connected with, comfortable at (institution)?

9. Tell me about what it's like getting used to life as a student at (institution)?

10. Tell me about what it's like for you as a (man, woman, adult, African American/Hispanic) person getting used to life as a student at (institution)? [Prompt for positive, as well as negative, aspects if needed.]

11. What were the most difficult problems you faced in becoming a student at (institution)?

PANIC BUTTON QUESTION: Am I asking the right questions? Is there a better way to ask what you think about what its like to be a new student here? What should I know?

General "Effects"

12. Think about "learning" in a very broad sense. Where does the real learning go on around here?

13. If you "ran the zoo," what would you do to help new students feel like they're valuable members of this institution? [If necessary, make clear you're not asking for a general evaluation of the school.]

14. What's special about this place?

PTT/
September 16, 1992